

### *Just Say "No"*

A member of a diet club was determined to make it through a full week without cheating. She dropped into a café one day for a cup of coffee. A man with two doughnuts and a cup of coffee sat down on the other side of the table. The pastries smelled delicious, but the woman remained firm in her resistance. Lo and behold, after a while the man got up, leaving behind one whole doughnut. A great struggle ensued within the woman, and temptation triumphed. She reached across the table, picked up the doughnut and started eating it. Just then the man came back with a second cup of coffee. Temptation: It looks so good.

Mark Twain once said, "I can resist everything except temptation."

Every year on this 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent we turn to this story of Jesus being tempted, and his saying "no" to the devil's temptations. Jesus' 40 days of temptation in the wilderness remind us of our own 40 days in this season before Easter. The Lenten 40 days is for us a time of *self-denial*, of saying "No" to our own way and "Yes" to God's way. *Prayer* and *fasting* have been our tools for this through the centuries, to help us turn toward God. But it has also become customary to *give up something* for Lent. Anybody here giving up something? It is not too late. By doing this, we practice in a small way saying "No" so that we are prepared to say "**No**" in larger matters -- denying ourselves, resisting temptation, and renouncing the ways of evil (that devil or *will* out that which opposes God's will).

This is a time to practice *just saying "No"*. I know you can pronounce it: "No!" That is not so hard, except for this: the problem with renouncing the devil and saying "No" to temptation is that **it looks so good!**

How many are giving up something for Lent that you actually like? Somebody is always trying to slide through by offering to give up Brussels sprouts or dusting the house or something else they find distasteful. But that is not the way the devil works, as Jesus found out. The devil has a blue dress on. The tempter is a wolf in grandma's pajamas telling Red Riding Hood to come closer. You may think that temptation is an invitation to do something obviously bad -- steal something, hurt someone, pollute the community's drinking water. That is not temptation; that is stupidity or meanness or desperation.

Temptation which the devil brings always looks good, and has some very good things about it:

The diet-busting doughnut that smells so heavenly...

The crippling monthly payments dressed in a great house or awesome car...

The lie that will benefit your company or keep your friend out of trouble...

The companionship whose warmth is so good when your marriage has become so cold...

The drug "ecstasy" that makes you feel so good while it tries to kill you...

The Nazis, now image of evil, but in 1930 offering to desperate people answers, prosperity, national pride, a great cause, and an easy scapegoat.

Temptations from the devil are things that look pretty good, even if you know they are not right, or that they are not really good for you. They may have much good about them, but still be wrong, not what God desires for you.

So Jesus found himself tempted, by the devil, in the wilderness. Jesus was struggling to be clear about the direction of his life and the nature of his ministry ahead. The devil offers to help him.

**Tempting gift #1:** “Jesus, I see that you are hungry. Do you know that as the Son of God you could change these stones into bread? Bread is good. Think of the great meal you could whip up.” “*No!*” says Jesus, “*one does not live by bread alone. Life is not from bread, but from God. My life and ministry will not serve my own needs, but will depend on God’s providing.*”

**Tempting gift #2:** “Jesus, here us a glimpse of all the kingdoms of the world. I give them to you to rule over if you will just worship me. Think of the power you would have to do good; consider all the good you could do for people as their ruler.” “*No!*” replies Jesus, “*worship and serve only the Lord your God. My ministry will flow from the authority and power of God, not your kind of power.*”

**Tempting gift #3:** “Jesus, consider this. Jump off the pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple. You know that God will send angels to protect you from harm, and the crowds will leap to believe and follow you!” The devil himself here quotes scripture, misconstruing Psalm 91 to make it sound like a good thing to do. “*No!*” answers Jesus, “*that psalm is about trusting not testing God. You shall not test the Lord your God. And my ministry will not use such spiritual showbiz to get people to believe.*” Jesus will persuade them for God through suffering love.”

So the ministry of Jesus began not with something he did, but with what he did not do. It began with renunciation, with saying “No” to some very attractive offers. Often people are remembered for how they said “No,” for what they renounced. George Washington retired as Commander in Chief and returned to his Mount Vernon home, saying “No” to assuming king-like powers. Abraham Lincoln said “No” to slavery, even though it further divided the nation. I know a man who said “No” to an attractive out-of-state job offer with a company that later proved to be unworthy. I know a young family man who gave up a promising career and return to college for the career to which he was called. I know a woman who said “No” to a lucrative position for another with less pay and more hours because better served her family. I know people who have said “No” to questionable tax deductions, second helpings, a romantic invitation, credit card debt -- and whose lives were changed by what they *did not do*.

I wonder, is there something today that you need to renounce? What is it to which you need to say, “No”? Is there a temptation before you that looks good, but is wrong? This is not just a matter of your willpower. Jesus did not renounce temptation altogether on his own, but relied on the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit of God will help you. Help you to say “No”. I read about a little girl whose camp counselor was trying to prepare her for the world, asking, “What if the devil comes to your door and tries to lead you astray?” The little girl replied, “I will ask Jesus to answer the door for me.” We could do worse than to ask such assistance.

The devil departed from Jesus, the story concludes, waiting until an “*opportune time*”. Waiting to try again. What is there now for you which needs God’s help in saying “**No**”?

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